

INVALUABLE

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Does everything that exists have a meaning? Does everything that exists have value? As humans, we question these existential quandaries endlessly. We will never know how and why we, and the world around, us exist. The only truth is that we exist. We get happiness, sadness, and frustration from existence. We agonize about our existence, mostly related to the existence of others. For instance, we find pleasure in certain things: we may find meaning for our lives from the existence of a dear person or we may find happiness from the possession of a special object. When we build a relationship with someone or something, it creates new meaning. The meaning and value of existence are changeable depending on where and how something exists. For instance, even though it is a lifeless object, if I have a strong attachment to the object a new meaning is created. This meaning is different from the previous meaning of the object, it therefore now exists for me as something unique. My studio practice explores the meaning and value of the existence of things, including humans, and reveals them through photography, video, and installation. My art consists of giving new meaning to abandoned or forgotten objects and considers the essential meaning of human existence. Drawing on Semiotics this paper documents how my work considers new meanings for ordinary objects and situations.

To evaluate something as worthless or meaningless is very subjective. Someone can say the cellphone that is in my photographic image is valueless to him or her but it is still valuable to me and that is why I cannot throw it out of my life. Even though it is very valuable personally, it seems to lack value objectively and socially. The objects that I used in my *Rebirth* (fig 1) series have been either long in use or have been substituted

for new technology, hence they have lost their relationship with society. Making new relationships in order to give new meaning to these abandoned or forgotten objects was the first step of my studio practice. In order to do this, a study of how a meaning is created and interpreted is required. Also, how meaning is conveyed to a viewer and is perceived by a viewer should be considered as well. As a visual artist, I think communication with viewers is the most important part of making of art. I believe this is the reason for making art and the reason for the existence of artworks. Semiotics and *defamiliarization*¹ have influenced my work in terms of making-meaning and interpreting meaning and I will analyze my work through these theories.

Semiotics is the study of meaning-making, the study of signs and the processes of meaningful communication². Semiotics explores linguistics since it is a study of communication, however, it also studies non-linguistic signs. The study of the semiotics of non-linguistic signs begins in earnest in the mid-1900s and Jan Mukarovsky³ was the first theorist who introduced Semiotics in the study and criticism of art. He argued that art can be read as a sign. ⁴ Generally, a sign is the basic unit of meaning in Semiotics and is composed of a 'signifier' that is the object itself and a 'signified' that is an idea or concept inherent in the signifier. When we read a sign we use 'codes' that are a system

¹ In literature and other forms of artistic production: the effect or technique of disrupting the reader's or audience's habitual perception of the world and making familiar elements in a text, play, etc., seem strange and fresh, esp. by means of drawing attention to the language or formal devices used. Later also more generally: the fact or process of rendering something unfamiliar. Oxford English Dictionary. 2017. s.v "Defamiliarization."

² Oxford English Dictionary. 2017. s.v "Semiotics."

³ Jan Mukarovsky (1891–1975) Czechoslovakian structuralist, known mainly for his contributions to aesthetics and the semiotics of art. Mukařovský studied linguistics and aesthetics at the philological faculty of Charles University in Prague. Oxford Reference. 2017. s.v "Jan Mukarovsky"

⁴ Jan Mukarovsky, *Art as Semiological Fact* (Cambridge U. Press, 1988) 1-7.

to imply a meaning.

Defamiliarization is an artistic technique from Russian literature that makes common things look different or unfamiliar in order to emphasize perception of the familiar. As a photo-based artist, I used this technique to encode a message since photography is often called a codeless message due to the assumption that it represents or copies reality.



Fig 1 Rebirth_Sound Card, 44×66 inches, digital print, 2016

Rebirth

My art practice works to give new meaning and value to an object that has lost it due to societal changes. In *Rebirth*, I created new relationships with consumer objects, especially small electronic parts, by photographing them.

I found several computer chips inside an old computer when I was preparing to move a couple of months ago. It was my first desktop, which I bought 11 years ago. Even though I had another desktop I could not bring myself to discard the computer because it was still working and kept memories of the times passed. But I had to throw it out when I moved. When I opened the computer to destroy the hard drive I saw the

beautiful chips inside and I had a very weird feeling. I remember it was like sorrow or sadness even though it was not a living thing. I kept just the chips and I went home to Korea. I spent 1 month there and during that time, my aunt passed away. She was my mother's younger sister and she was close with me. I could not stop thinking about life and death. Why do we exist here as humans? How should I live my life before I die? This question and my desire to find the answer became the motivation behind the *Rebirth* series. My question is ultimately about the meaning of life and comes from my experience of not feeling valuable in society, not unlike the computer chips in my images. When I encountered the computer chips, I was reminded of this feeling. Rapid technological development and modern capitalism have made life very convenient but have caused a loss of humanity. As a result we are put in a life that seeks materialistic values rather than human values such as compassion. We experience alienation easily due to a loss of meaning in our lives. Through this work, I tried to make new relationships and give new meaning to the small abandoned parts of discarded technology showing that everything that exists in the world is valuable even though they are just small lifeless objects.

Rebirth's signifier is the small electrical parts from computers or electronic devices in the images. Its denotative messages are technology, communication, electronic engineering. I have encoded connotative messages that are not the same as the common image through *defamiliarization* in order to reveal new meaning in each object's existence. By photographing the object I treat it very carefully like a precious thing, and the devalued item is reborn as valued, unlike its previous image. This

challenges the viewer's perception of the object and its associated value leading to opportunities to think about the effect of making a trivial object significant on ourselves and the world around us.

In the photograph...the relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of "transformation" but of "recording," and the absence of a code clearly reinforces the myth of photographic "naturalness": the scene, captured mechanically, not humanly (the mechanical is here a guarantee of objectivity). Man's interventions in the photograph (framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed) all effectively belong to the plane of connotation; it is as though in the beginning (even if utopian) there were a brute photograph (frontal and clear) on which man would then lay out, with the aid of various techniques, the signs drawn from a cultural code.⁵

I have paid careful attention to the coding of my images since I prefer to convey messages through my artwork. I have tried to intervene beyond the essential mechanical interventions like framing, distance, lighting, focus, and speed. By removing objectivity from my images I attempt to convey connotative messages to the viewer.

The objects in my images are shot in the lighting studio, and are made to be put in the middle of the frame and verify their identity. These objects are moved from inside the computer to in front of the camera in the studio. This process highlights the objects not only as parts of a whole computer but also as independent objects that exist separately from their initial context. Using this technique, an object is transformed and escapes from its previously assigned role. It then has a new identity and becomes a main focus in my images. Also, eliminating the background places the emphasis on the

⁵ Barthes, Roland, *Rhetoric of the Image, Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 158.

object making it more like a drawing which selects significant elements from the object without representing everything about the object⁶. This in turn makes the meaning stronger.

Photography is seen as a miniature image of reality and its elements are familiar to viewers. I had to make them unfamiliar so I enlarged the images in a way that viewers may not have seen before. I made 44 × 66 inch print using a 4 × 7 inch sound card (fig1). Therefore, most viewers initially read the image as a night scene or space.

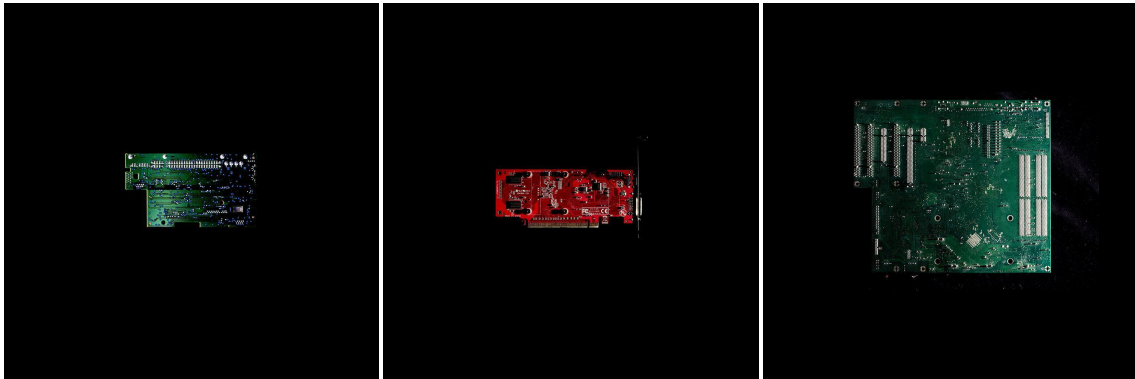


Fig 2-4, Rebirth_DVD player chip, red chip, motherboard, 24×24 inches, digital print, 2016

I used strong lighting in these images (fig2-4) to invite viewers to read the objects in different ways that might defy to its own meaning. This lighting adds a strange atmosphere that makes the objects look different.

⁶ Barthes, Roland, *Rhetoric of the Image, Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang. 1977), 158.

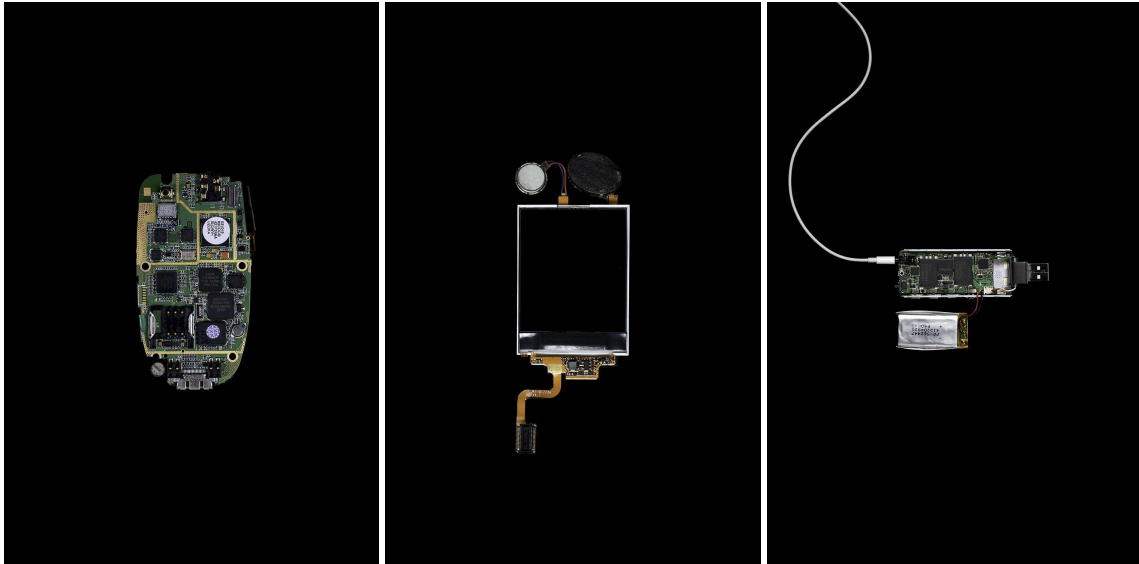


Fig 5-7, Rebirth_2G Cellphone, Cellphone monitor, MP3, 44×29 inches, digital print, 2016

This way the object itself stands out in the images (fig 5-7). A Viewer needs to take time to read the object as an enlarged cellphone part and most of them in the end say that it is beautiful. Thus, this discarded technology became a beautiful object in the image. I used strobes positioned at 90 and 45 degrees and a diffusion panel behind the object. On the strobe at 90 degrees I had a gridded softbox, while on the strobe placed at 45 degrees I used a 3 ft octobox. This created a dynamic color range, intensified by the non reflective background and highlighted the details of the objects through the distribution of light in a relatively confined space.

This work is influenced by Pon-ch'ang Ku and Soo-Kang Kim's in terms of the minimal composition of the picture and providing a chance for reinterpretation of existing meanings of the object. Ku makes a new image of the vessels in his vessel series using his specific method; it looks like he breathes a new life into the object. His lifeless

object is a living thing in his image. In Kim's recent work, she took photographs of everyday items minimalistically⁷: neatly folded towels are not the towels anymore, and orderly piled books are not the books anymore. The objects tell the story very quietly and in detail. Both artists selected lifeless objects then separate them from their own meanings via the creation of photographic images. Their objects approach the viewer in an unusual way with a totally different existence being attributed to everyday, familiar things. Irving Penn's Cigarette series also influenced my work as well. The cigarettes are not dirty things anymore in his images. He says the purpose of the images is to change the cigarette into the beautiful like magic.

Jin talks about photography semiotics in his book, *Photography Semiology*.

사진 기호학이란 결국 바라봄과 바라봄의 파악(해석)의 미학이다. 사물이 아니라 사물의 형상에 대한 파악이고, 또 순간이 아니라 사물의 순간에 대한 파악이고, 존재가 아니라 존재의 인식에 대한 파악이다.

Photography semiotics involves the aesthetics of the gaze and the interpretation of the gaze. It is an understanding of form of an object, not the object itself, of a specific moment in the existence of an object, not the moment itself and of an awareness of an existence, not the being itself.⁸

When viewers interpret and approach the meaning behind a work of art, it becomes interesting. Similarly, the *Rebirth* series has the signification not only as an object itself,

⁷ A style of painting associated with the Russian-American artist John Graham (1881–1961), characterized by an attempt to reduce the art form to its most basic elements. Oxford English Dictionary. 2017. s.v “Minimalism”

⁸ Dong Sun Jin, *Photography Semiology* (Seoul: 푸른세상, 2015), 18.

not just a represented image itself, but as the meaning from the object's image that exists in this specific time, in this specific space when it is possible to communicate with a viewer.

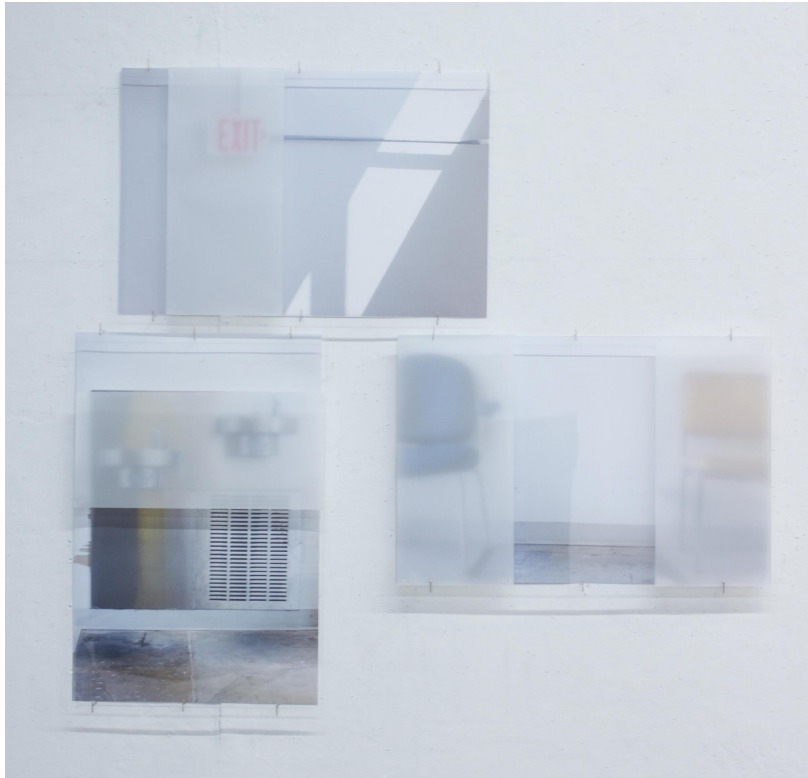


Fig 8 Rename_Being There, 11×14 inches, digital print, acrylic, and frosted film, 2016

Rename_Being There

This piece consists of photographs that are partly covered by a frosted film (Fig 8). The images contain everyday stuff or forgotten items in our lives. The images are of neglected chairs in the hallway, an exit sign that nobody cares about until it is needed, and a fountain that is always there but rarely noticed. This work is connected with the

Rebirth series, but it is distinguished from the approach used in previous works. The images in this body of work are very familiar to us. Not only are the objects familiar but also the images represent the objects in specific moments in time and space that are also familiar because it represents the objects as they are, these images are limited to conveying a connotative message since the scene is too familiar.

Barthes was the first person that uses the term photographic semiotics in his essay "Myth Today." He applies semiotics to photography in his writing "The Photographic Message," "Rhetoric of Image," and "The Third Meaning." Roland Barthes defines unary photographs in his essay "Camera Lucida".

The photograph is unary when it emphatically transforms "reality" without doubling it, without making it vacillate (emphasis is a power of cohesion): no duality, no indirection, no disturbance....the photograph can "shout," not wound.⁹

A unary photograph consists of one sign so it is easy to read and very direct when conveying its meaning. It is hard to be interested and hard to get a code from it since it is very obvious. The images that I use could be categorized as unary since they are everyday items in our lives. However, when they are partially covered by frosted film, and by doing so creates an additional meaning. Therefore these photographs escape the unary situation and gain another signified. The objects, in fact, became covered objects. In *Rebirth*, the object is reborn as a new meaning while the objects in *Rename_Being*

⁹ Roland Barthes, trans., *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 41.

There arouse viewers' curiosity and make them focus on the objects over and under the film--performing a similar function although using a different technique. Calling these objects 'forgotten' suggests that nobody is concerned about the objects but when it receives attention from others, by being hidden through the frosted panels, their value changes from ordinary to intriguing. That is the main goal for this work. Arousing curiosity provides a stage from which to interpret another sign and highlight the meaning of the existence of the objects.

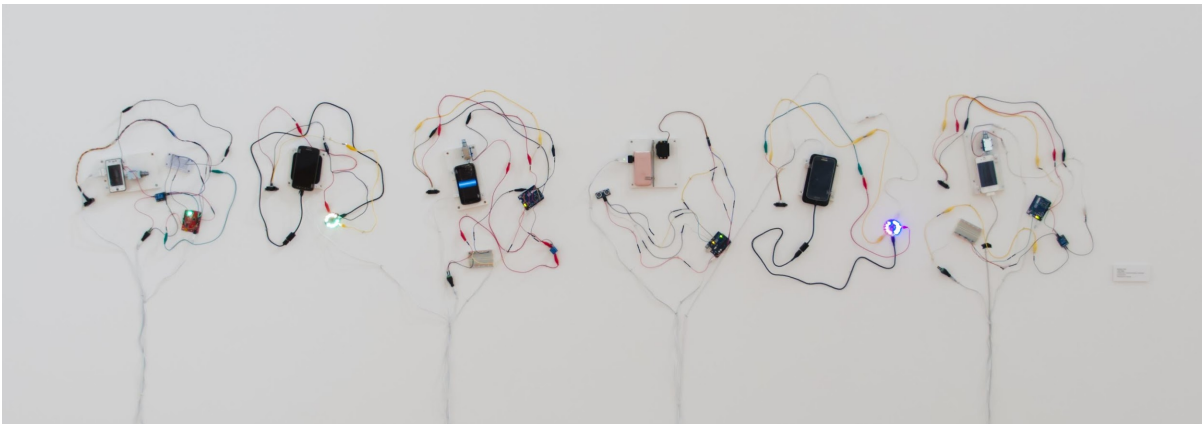


Fig 9 Rename_I Am Here, cellphones, motion sensors, micro controllers, electronic components 2016

Rename_I Am Here

This installation consists of outdated cellphones with motion sensors (Fig 9). These cellphones, of course, still work but they were all discarded because some are a little slow, some are behind the trend, or some are partially defective. This work is connected to the previous two works thematically but while *Rebirth* and *Rename_Being There* give new meaning to the objects through images, *Rename_I Am Here* shows real

objects on the wall through installation. This work only “wakes up” when a viewer is in front of the work via motion sensor and if there is no one in front of the work it remains turned off. Without a viewer this work is incomplete and imperfect.

In the book *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, authors Sturken and Cartwright argue that viewers ultimately make the meaning of an image or artwork. This idea is related to the theories of Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes and other theorists who suggested that the meaning of artwork can be analyzed differently depending on the viewer’s experience and culture.

Images generate meanings, yet the meanings of a work of art, a photograph, or a media text do not, strictly speaking, lie in the work itself, where they were placed by the producer waiting for viewers to find them. Rather, meanings are produced through the complex negotiations that make up the social process and practices through which we produce and interpret images.¹⁰

I became interested in interactive art because I strived to communicate with viewers when making art as mentioned above. Like the first work’s title, *Rebirth*, I would like the objects to be physically “reborn” by a viewer.

Because every cellphone has different specifications, I had to map out each device individually to react to the viewer’s motion. They are controlled by a microcontroller and consist of three distinct setups: push the button directly using

¹⁰ Marita Sturken, Lisa Cartwright, *An Introduction to visual Culture* (New York: Oxford University press, 2009), 49.

solenoids, push the button electrically by programming and open the flip phone physically using a servo. These three types add variety and thus interest to the piece visually and compositionally.

The reason I used a cellphone as an interactive object is that it drives a number of signs culturally and socially, and it speaks a lot about personal stories. Even though, in our current technological era, it is not an item to feel deep attachment towards, it is an object that spends a long time with its owner. Due to the inflated price, new cellphones increase in value. The cellphone has many signifiers—that as a portable tool for communication and an item to make life more convenient. After the addition of a camera inside and connection to the internet, it occupies a huge part of our lives. They may even cause family or social problems because of a break in conversation or addiction.

When the abandoned cellphones are reborn as art, I hope they are appreciated as a drawing or painting might be since the installation itself is a familiar form of art to viewers. The white wall becomes a canvas. The wires chosen are various colors. They are extended and then placed randomly in order to function as lines in the composition of the installation. In addition, lights from the microcontrollers and other electronic components make points on the wall. And the shapes of the cellphones, microcontrollers, and sensors make shapes on the “canvas” of the gallery wall. The objects are thus converted into art objects.

We usually turn a cellphone on or off intentionally. An object generally doesn't turn on automatically especially if it is abandoned. The experience that the cellphone is turned on by itself is unusual when a viewer approaches it. Therefore, this work provides opportunities to think about the objects in different ways after catching the viewer's eye.

The main goal of this piece is that the viewers wake up the forgotten and abandoned items. It is connected to the two previously mentioned two works thematically in terms of creating new meaning. Also, conceptually it is meaningful in terms of its interactive component—the viewers complete the piece by engaging with the work. A viewer plays the role of providing new meaning to the objects through his/her interaction.

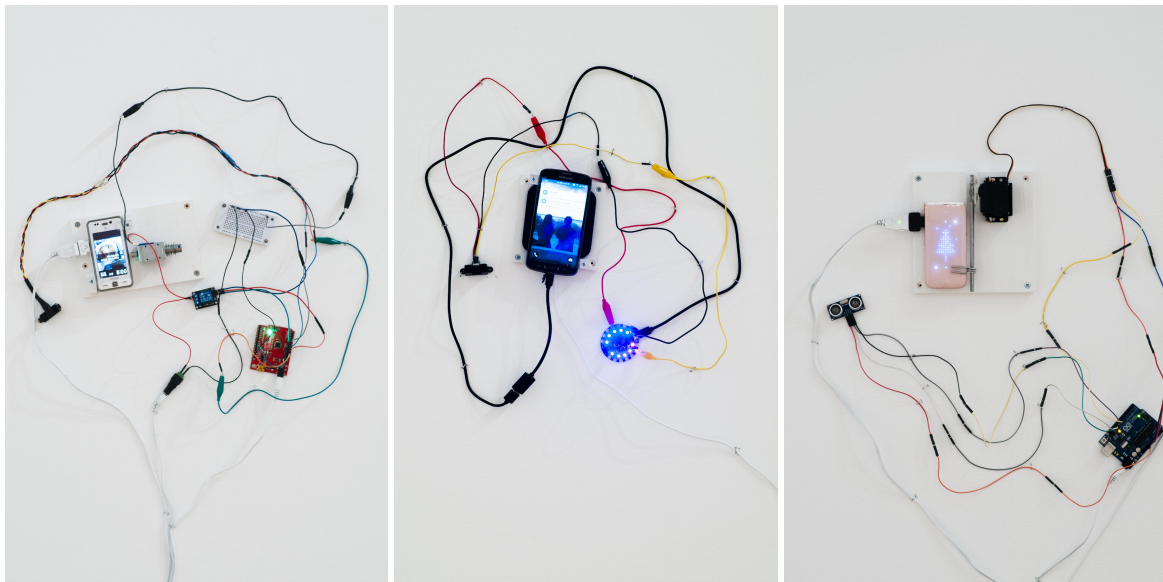


Fig 10 Rename_I Am Here, details



Fig 11 Existence: I am... single channel video, ceramic masks, variable, 2017

Existence: I am...

Through the previous three works, I tried to impart a new meaning to abandoned or forgotten objects in order to make them worthwhile once again. The ultimate goal was to suggest that no matter how trivial and insignificant, an object can be valuable. The motivation to create these works came from a moment when I experienced the feeling that I am useless in my life and in the world. So I endeavored to express some sort of value to human existence. Sadly, we believe that we are indeed valuable but we do not speak of it easily. We are quick to judge others by many standards. We often evaluate ourselves by comparison to other people and determine our value accordingly. We know evaluating people is wrong and we think everyone is

equal, but we still value people through various differing standards. Thus in this work, I reveal two main concepts: human being's dignity and uniqueness. We all have dignity for the simple reason that we are just human. The differences we see is really just a difference between unique humans and should not have to lead to discrimination or valuation.

The video work (Fig 11) shows many people's faces as they speak their names. It is projected onto a series of white masks installed on a gallery wall. I attempt to reveal the dignity of a human being as a ceramic mask. The source material of the ceramic, is soil, called the "mother of life", and originated before civilization. The ceramic mask's signifier is the same face shape and its signified is the results of master artisan; delicate, elegant, beautiful, and a valuable object. The video footage shows people's faces saying their names. It reveals the difference of each individual's unique identity. When the video footage is projected onto the masks, the glazed mask makes reflection and in doing so becomes a manifestation of a human being's dignity.

A human recognizes a thing or a person through a name. From the name, it can be distinguishable from others and generate meaning. For instance, a stuffed animal of a bear is called a "teddy bear"--it's an agreement in society. When the stuffed animal is called a teddy bear, the concept and the linguistic message combines to create a sign. Many teddy bears displayed on shelves in stores have the same sign as a "teddy bear." It has a meaning through having a name but one teddy bear is no different from the one next to it. When someone buys a teddy bear and gives it a specific name, then it has a

unique meaning to the person who built a relationship with the teddy bear.

Monad Rrenban said, “The name is a unique medium for this presentation and name underlies any being, or could even be said to resonate as linguistic being of every being.”¹¹ Since the name is a signifier for human uniqueness, I chose to have my participants speak their name to distinguish themselves from others. When a baby is delivered, the name is given, usually prepared before the birth of the baby. The babies use the name to define themselves their whole life. When they say, “I am (name)” they fill their name with all they are. The action of saying their name is the first step to distinguishing one baby from another. Therefore the video footage on the ceramic mask implies a person’s dignity and a unique individual identity despite the similarity of the masks.

When projected, the image is surrounded by other empty masks. The time of projection is short, it then disappears and moves to another mask and repeats. Different people’s faces are projected on the same mask and the time and location are variable. It appears as one person or several persons together. This movement and variation adds tension and arouses curiosity. It catches viewer’s eyes and leads them to focus on the work more.

¹¹ Monad Rrenban, *Wild, Unforgettable Philosophy in early works of Walter Benjamin* (New York: Oxpord, 2005), 53.

Summary

Through *Rebirth* and *Rename_Being There*, I have considered the meaning of being in the world and then attempted to give a new meaning to the objects which are represented. In the image making aspect, I tried to encode another meaning besides the meaning that it already has by manipulating the image technically and also trying to narrow the range of decoding in order to convey the message to the viewer by putting a linguistic message or poem on the image. These approaches have allowed me go further to find ways to communicate with viewers more easily following my initial work on *Rename_I Am Here*. Lastly, through the *Existence_I Am...*, I endeavor to show that every human being is valuable. The value is the result of human dignity while at the same time individual distinction.

Methodologically, I explored different media in order to try to extend expression, and tried to intermingle media together like ceramics, video, and installation. By integrating technology into art, I experimented how both of them could play together aesthetically. I have wanted my art to operate as a question rather than an opinion or an answer in the viewer's mind. I wish the viewer to extend his/her thought from my question then communicate with my art with his/her own idea. I hope my art makes someone smile, moisten at one's eyes, or feel consoled. These are my primary goals for making art.

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